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ABSTRACT

This document provides narrative portraits of early adolescents in middle school and junior high school as described by preservice university students majoring in middle level education. The observations were made during a course titled "Middle School Programs and Practices," which develops the middle school concept across different subject areas, and in a course called "Reading in the Middle School." The descriptions are grouped into the following categories: students who fit in; students who were not being helped by the program; students who were helped; students who represented various developmental stages; and students who were like the observer when he or she was at that age. (MM)

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DESCRIBING STUDENTS IN MIDDLE LEVEL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Ann Lockledge and Judith A. Hayn

Early adolescents in middle school and junior high classrooms are described by preservice university students majoring in middle level education. The observations were made during courses in Middle School Programs and Practices and in Reading in the Middle School. The narrative descriptions are categorized by characteristics of specific students. The categories include students who fit in and got something out of the activities, students who were having troubles for whom the program was not helpful., students that could be helped, students who represent developmental stages of the young adolescent. and students who were like the observer when he or she was at that age.

DESCRIBING STUDENTS IN MIDDLE LEVEL CLASSROOMS

Ann Lockledge and Judith A. Hayn

The popular media is rarely flattering to the early adolescents that populate the classrooms in middle schools and junior high schools across the country. What are they really like, these students who have spent two to three hours on a weekend walking about the mall before going to the movies or returning home? They never seem to be alone because they feel more secure and less vulnerable when they go in groups. In fact they are so preoccupied with themselves that they are poor reporters of influences on their own perceptions and attitudes (Lockledge,1991).

Preservice university students majoring in middle level education often prove to be keen observers of these young adolescents and can provided windows for all of us to view students in middle school classrooms. The observations were written in classes taught by one of the authors in Middle School Programs and Practices which develops the middle school concept across the different subject areas or in a middle school reading course from the co-author. It may be that students who choose to major in middle grades education are prone to become sensitized to early adolescent problems or it may be that they have a special enthusiasm for the children they will soon teach, but whatever the reason, they have perceptive observations to share.

The narrative descriptions fell into categories of characteristics of specific students. They seemed far more interested in watching the students than the teachers. In analyzing the reports it was found that most of the observers mentioned something about students who fit in and got something out of the activities. They also reported on students who seemed to be having troubles and falling through the cracks and for whom the program was not helpful. One of the more rewarding experiences reported were those where they found students they could help. Of great practical value for these

observers was when they were to able to verify the variety of developmental stages of the young adolescent. Perhaps the most interesting to read responses were those where the observer had found a student who was just like he or she was at that age.

Students Who Fit In

"One of the popular girls is Judy. She has the fanciest clothes, backpack, etc. She always tries to sneak out her mirror and fix her hair, or one of her girl friend's hair. She sits in the center of all the girls and is definitely the "queen". All of the other girls want to sit beside her and be like her. She participates in the discussions if she thinks they are interesting. Most of the other girls follow her, participating when she does.

"Omar's personality has the brilliance of a bright light. He keeps a very pleasant smile on his face and is always eager to help his teacher with projects that she is working on. He is enthusiastic about school and it shows through his willingness and eagerness to participate in extracurricular activities.

"Tricia is every teacher's dream. She participates a lot, works diligently and has a lot of friends. Tricia is a black girl who is new to the community. She is very well dressed and seems to get along with all of her peers. It is easy to see that Tricia is quite intelligent and enjoys coming to school . She is always eager to share her thoughts and feelings with the class. Typically when the students are asked to work on something independently or in groups you see Tricia working hard on her assignments and then doing a little socializing.

"Rashid is an outgoing student who tries to act a little older and tougher than the rest of the students. He has a hoop earring and a box haircut which emphasize the difference between him and the others in the class. He takes band at school, but does not seem to care very much about his academic studies. His writing is far from adequate for his grade level, but if this is the result of a learning disability, lack of effort, or a dislike of English, I have no idea. He speaks and writes non-standard Black English such as, "because we be home." Rashid anticipates going into the army because his cousins, grandfather, and his brother are or were in the army. Rashid is not really a rowdy or bully, he just considers himself to be cool.

"Kinisha is creative. After completing her assignments, she usually draws pictures of various things. During one of the activities in class, the one where the teacher gives the lead line and the student completes it, the teacher made the incomplete statement, "If I had a million dollars I would _____ Kinisha rejected, "feed all the hungry people in the world." Kinisha enjoys associating with her friends at and away from school. She conducts herself in a more mature manner than most of her classmates.

"Hank is a cute little boy with blond hair and brown eyes. He likes to be the center of attention. He is always the first to raise his hand when a question is asked. The teacher does not have a problem trying to get Hank to talk, but sometimes can't get him to hush. Hank volunteers for everything, no matter what it is---ranging from going on an errand to straightening up. I think he comes from a well off family by looking at his clothes, bookbag, jacket, etc. and listening to him talk. He has been to a lot of places and seems to know a lot about many

things. He talks about such things as snorkeling, scuba diving, sailing, etc. so I assume he likes the water. I think Hank thoroughly enjoys homebase.

"Stephie is a sociable student. She seems to get along well with everyone, but of course she has a select few that she hangs around more than others. She is an only child and is always wearing the latest name brand fashions. Stephie seems like an active extracurricular student; she is a cute little girl who wants to grow up a little too fast. Stephie does not favor the academic side of school but rather would like to be a professional soccer player when she grows up. She shows all of the characteristics of becoming a lovely young lady."

Students Who Are In Trouble

"Sometimes I think Tommy's middle name is Trouble. This particular young man is more than mischievous. During my tutoring he ended up in ISS twice. He skips class, fights with other children, threatened a girl with a pair of scissors, and uses extreme profanity. This young man has little or no self esteem and demands as much individual attention as anyone is willing to give.

Sondra is one of the prettier girls in the class., From observing Sondra, I would say she thinks advisor/advisee is a waste of time. She twists her hair, makes faces behind the teacher's back and acts as if she could care less about other student's problems. During a discussion on how the eighth graders were harassing the sixth graders on the bus and on the walkways, she defended the eighth graders and acted as if she didn't care about her classmates. It is this kind of student that I am not sure if A/A helps, the ones who think they know it all.

"David was always late to class. He also talks constantly. I found him to be a sweet boy, but very immature. He always has some input during the discussions but never about the subject matter. Making a decision is virtually impossible for him. Once we all made leaves, putting our names and what we were thankful for on them. It was the end of the period and David still could not decide what he was really thankful for even though I had given him at least ten ideas.

"Dennis is a rather quiet young man compared to the others. Occasionally he lets his presence be known, but for the most part he sits quietly in his seat. He is interested in his grades and electronics. He is a little shy and easily embarrassed.

"George cannot seem to control himself. He has a broken arm, but that hasn't slowed him down. One day they were doing a lesson on decision making. They were supposed to decide what to do if someone dared them to jump out of the highest tree on the block. He became so excited, he could not keep quiet. When reminded to raise his had, he would raise his hand and talk at the same time. Tom needs to learn self control. Hopefully the decision making unit will help him learn some of the skills he needs--like knowing the appropriate time to decide to talk.

"Melanie is a teacher's worst nightmare! She is very hyper and loud. She enjoys telling things about others students to almost anyone who will listen. She often seems to be striving for attention by picking on everyone and always doing

something she should not be doing. If the teacher asks her to be quiet, she may be silent for a total of thirty seconds. During intramurals she is never paying attention to the volleyball and is one of the first eliminated from the game, and often the volleyball hits her on the back. She appears to have a carefree attitude about life, others, and school. For no apparent reason she may yell out in class during a game and is always one of the students talking during instructional activities. Melanie is friendly to everyone in her own way and they are generally nice to her. She is just rowdy.

"Shelly is tall for his age and red headed. He is a child of the military but not a brat. He said he had moved every six months of his life. That may be a bit of an exaggeration but he has lived all over Europe, in Hawaii and over much of the U.S. He is quiet but appears to be very intelligent. Because he arrived after the start of the semester, he is seated away from the rest of the group instead of being at a table. He has an individual seat in this Home Ec room BEHIND a counter, partitioned away from the rest of the class. Yet he is the very student who needs to be made to feel a part of a group. Whenever there is an activity he will get up and find a seat at a table but if a student comes in late then he will have to get and up and find another. Somebody is letting hi slip between the cracks."

Students Whom I Helped

"Most of the students were studying for a social studies test on countries and their capitals, but Jeremy was just sitting. I asked him if he had something to

study and he said that maybe he should study for the test. Five minutes later he was still just staring out the window with no books out. I told him him to get out his study guide and I would help him study for the test. Jeremy was overwhelmed with the 25 countries and their capitals. I suggested he divide them into groups of 5. In a very few minutes, we had mastered the first 5. Before the homebase period was over he knew 10 and was pleased with his progress. He just needed a little guidance with study skills.

"One of my favorite students was Rhonda. She was the class clown, always full of energy. She participated in any activity and added so much to discussion time. We became quite good friends because she goes to the university for tutoring at the education lab and has seen me there working with my tutee. If I were the teacher, I would be grateful for students like Rhonda because they add that extra energy needed on some mornings to get the rest of the class going.

"One boy named B.T. is what my mom calls a runt. He is the smallest kid in the class, wears glasses, and sits around observing, for the most part. I found out he is a baseball card collector, like myself, and even though he is little, he still wants to argue with me about statistics. I noticed that he doesn't like touching. He would get close enough for conversation but if I moved closer or reached toward him he'd move out of range and avert his eyes.

"On the other hand there is Trina. She is prim and proper. The boys call her "Miss Cover Girl!" She never really likes to talk or participate in class activities. I feel she thinks most of the activities are childish and she doesn't want to express her feelings to the rest of the class. During intramurals, she complained

constantly about the sand getting on her shes or the wind blowing her hair. She is involved in most of the school clubs, drama, and works on the school newspaper. All of the girls look up to her. I tried to talk with her, but most of her responses were one word answers or comments. I kept trying to find something she was interested in, and finally I did--hair and make-up. Once we began talking about hair styles and name brand products, we became quite good friends.

"Karen is overweight and self-conscious. I noticed that she seemed shy and withdrawn. Once I thought I heard someone teasing her about being fat. I make a special effort to speak to Karen when I arrive in the mornings and complement her in some way. Now Karen is waiting for me when I arrive. She needs the special attention and confidence building skills homebase can provide."

Students Who Represent Developmental Stages

"Peter is probably the first person anyone would notice when they come in the room. He is tall and very awkward right now. He is the type who likes to talk a lot and enjoys being heard. He is constantly participating. If there is a question asked, he has an answer but he never thinks about the question. He just opens his mouth and lets rip. He is the type that picks on others but most of the kids pick right back and laugh at what he is saying.

"Suzanne is a big girl, tall and big boned--maybe a little overweight. Her first day of school there was my first day of observing. She is taller and bigger than

anyone else in the class--boy, girl or teacher. She has extremely short blond/brown hair and always wears pants or jeans and a t-shirt. I have never seen her wear shorts or a skirt. Suzanne always comes into class first, sits in her seat and does not say anything to anyone. She comes in before homebase starts, gets out her books and does homework, reads, or sits quietly by herself. She does not ever talk to the teacher unless asked a question. If something is not going on like during the last couple of minutes of class, she finds an excuse to leave for her locker, the bathroom, the water fountain, somewhere. I wonder that she is getting anything out of home base.

"Danny is African American and about the height of a second grader. Yet there is something about him that is very mature. He walks slowly and deliberately. Sometimes he looks as if he could just bust out laughing at something. But Danny has erected a wall between himself and the rest of the class. I think there is a tremendous somebody behind it looking for the opportunity to come out.

"Harrison is by far the smallest boy in the class. He looks more like a third grader than a sixth grader. He has definitely not reached his growth spurt yet. He is very self conscious of being small which was not helped when he volunteered to go with a couple of other students to the office to pick up pumpkins and was told by another student that he was too small. He is very shy and does not say much. He sits in the very back seat on the far side of the room close to the "cool" guys. He clothes are not quite like the in crowd and he has a "normal" haircut not like some of the trendy "surfer" cuts in the class. When I first

started observing, Harrison did not talk much at all. Now he does talk to the guys around him, and acts happier about being in class than he did before.

"Carl is a plump little boy with glasses. One day not long after I started observing, Carl asked the class to help him with a problem. Carl's problem was that during P.E. a bigger and older student was pushing him out of line and thumbing him on the head. This was the first time I had ever seen a middler announce to classmates a problem like this and ask for the class's help. At first when the teacher asked the class to come up with possible solutions to Carl's problems, she got answers like push him or hit him back. Then someone suggested for Carl to ignore the bully but Carl responded that he had tried and it hadn't worked. After a lengthy discussion the class decided the best thing would be for their homebase teacher to talk to the PE teacher."

Students Who Are Like Me

"Sammy reminds me of me when I was in the sixth grade. By coincidence I sat down beside him the first day I observed. From that day on, when he found out why I was there, he wanted to know if I was sure teaching middle school was what I wanted to do. Sammy seemed to be kind of shy around girls and preferred not to talk to them very much. We had several conversations during the time I was observing. I looked forward to going back every Wednesday so I could talk with him. The day I taught, it was Sammy who saw when I was getting in trouble and would volunteer a comment to keep the group talking. If it was not for him jumping in and helping, I do not know if I would have made it through the

class as nervous as I was. It is Sammy that I will miss the most when I stop observing.

"Maureen reminds me of myself. She is very shy and quiet during class. You can't get her to say anything for the life of you and if you do, she gets really embarrassed. But before class starts, Maureen will sit there and talk to the girls around her. She always does her work with no complaints."

These are the windows that caring observers can open. Windows of idealism and frustration. Windows of joy and sorrow. Windows of wonder and of isolation. The view reveals the special world of the middle school classroom.

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